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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 YEREVAN 000171

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS TO ARMENIA

Classified By: Ambassador. Reasons: 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY. The Government of Armenia, local NGOs and international organizations working in Armenia largely acknowledge that Armenia has a problem with trafficking in persons. To date, Armenia has been discussed primarily as a country of origin and transit for trafficking victims. A recent case now establishes that Armenia may also be a country of destination for trafficking victims. INL staff met with a local NGO, which manages a trafficking victim assistance program in Armenia to discuss a recent case of trafficking in persons to Armenia for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Currently, 6 victims of Uzbek citizenship are being provided shelter and other necessary services by the NGO in Armenia and the alleged traffickers are being detained and investigated under Article 132 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes trafficking in persons. END SUMMARY.

RECENT ARREST OF TRAFFICKERS

12. (C) We were informed by a local NGO, Hope and Help, which provides assistance to victims of trafficking under the auspices of a USG-funded program, that Armenian law enforcement officials referred 6 Uzbek nationals to Hope and Help for assistance in mid-January. According to Hope and Help, traffickers, a woman and her two sons, were recently arrested under Article 132 of the Criminal Code, which criminalizes trafficking in persons, for their alleged role in organizing the trafficking of at least 8 Uzbek woman to Armenia for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The alleged traffickers are Uzbek citizens of Armenian nationality. They were arrested along with 8 presumed victims by the First Department of the Fourth Directorate of the National Police in mid-January. The alleged victims were later released and 6 of them were referred to Hope and Help, while an additional 2 women were referred to a separate NGO, which manages a domestic violence program in Armenia.

TRAFFICKING TO ARMENIA: A CASE STUDY

13. (C) During discussions with Hope and Help, we had the opportunity to speak briefly with 4 of the Uzbek women. One woman is 18 years old, 2 are 19 years old, and the other women are 20, 23 and 29. They are primarily from small towns in Uzbekistan and have similar family situations-- one or both parents are deceased; one of the women's husband passed away, leaving her alone to provide for her small child/children. All of the women allegedly knew that they would be going to Armenia to work as elite prostitutes in local high-end saunas. All of the women traveled to Armenia legally on their own passports. (Note: Uzbek nationals do not require a visa to travel to Armenia. End Note.)

14. (C) According to the women, they were not met at the airport, but took a taxi from the airport to a local hotel, where they were met by the trafficker, "Angela." The trafficker took their passports from them under the guise of registering them with local officials and the passports were not returned to them. (Note: The passports were confiscated by the Police at the time of the traffickers' arrest and remain with the Police at the time of writing. End Note.) There was no official agreement in place between the women and the traffickers; however, the women were told that they owed the traffickers USD 5,000 for the cost of travel and related services. It was verbally agreed that after working off the \$5,000 debt, the women would be free to continue working for themselves, but would provide 50% of earnings to the traffickers. They were moved to 2 apartments on Pushkin Street, in the center of the capital, Yerevan.

15. (C) In addition to the original \$5,000 debt, the women were required to pay \$300 each for the apartment where they lived (Note: They were living 4 to an apartment. End Note.) and \$100 each for food each month. This sum was taken from their monthly "earnings." Furthermore, under the guise of ensuring that the women were dressed appropriately, they were required to procure clothing and other accessories. The traffickers bought these things for them and they were charged exorbitant prices for them-- again the cost of the

goods being taken from their "earnings." In the same way, the traffickers procured articles for the apartments such as expensive sound systems, leather furniture, etc. Just before the New Year's holiday, the women each received their only payment to date-- \$100. The women were not allowed to move around the city without an escort, although two of the women claimed to have slightly more freedom of movement.

16. (C) According to Hope and Help, clients contacted the traffickers directly and agreed on the location and fee. The women were sent to exclusive saunas via taxi and returned the same way. They were required to provide the full fee to the traffickers upon their return. The women claim to have serviced on average 1-2 clients each day at a minimum. One woman estimates her "earnings" to be approximately \$3,500 in a month; a second believes she "earned" approximately \$4,500 in one month. The women reported to Hope and Help that their clients all used condoms and treated them well. (Comment: Hope and Help has arranged for gynecological exams for all of the women through their USG-funded assistance program. End Comment.)

17. (C) Although, they do not know the identity of any of their clients, the women reported that they were all obviously wealthy men driving expensive imported vehicles. (Comment: GOAM officials and local NGOs have previously asserted that Armenia is not likely a destination country due to the poor economic situation; however, Hope and Help believes that VIP clients in Armenia would likely prefer to procure services of women from outside Armenia to maintain their anonymity. End Comment.)

HOW DOES LAW ENFORCEMENT IN ARMENIA RATE?

18. (U) Article 132, criminalizing trafficking in persons, if done for mercenary purposes, was included in Armenia's Criminal Code, which was ratified in April 2003. Since the Code entered into effect in August 2003, several criminal investigations under Article 132 have been initiated by Armenian law enforcement. No cases to date have been prosecuted because investigations are still ongoing; however, a representative of the Office of the Procurator General is hopeful that the first case will be prosecuted in Spring 2004. Of these cases, Armenian law enforcement has closely cooperated with U.A.E. law enforcement on at least one case. Another case involving trafficking of women from Central Asia, including Uzbeks, through the Caucasus to the U.A.E. by an Armenian-Georgian trafficking ring highlights successful bilateral law enforcement cooperation between Armenia and Georgia. In fall of 2003, proactive Armenia law enforcement intervention saved several young, mentally ill women from being trafficked to the U.A.E. when they were intercepted at the airport while attempting to depart Armenia.

19. (C) On another level, the case described herein has provided the Embassy with the opportunity to monitor how Armenian law enforcement deals with victims of trafficking in persons. Two issues that Hope and Help is monitoring closely are the fate of the women's passports, which are in the custody of Police, and whether or not the women will be deported from Armenia. The Police have not yet indicated what will become of the passports; however, one officer did assert that the women might be deported from Armenia. Hope and Help maintains that the women have not violated Armenian immigration law, and therefore cannot legally be deported. Furthermore, they are concerned about the ability of the women to return to Uzbekistan and maintain their anonymity if they are officially deported from Armenia.

10. (C) Treatment of the victims at the time of arrest and during questioning has also been cause for concern. Armenian law does not provide victims/witnesses the right to have an attorney or other representative present during the interview process. The women have reported that there have been some instances of abuse and/or hostile interview tactics during questioning. One of the women alleged that during the first interrogation she was beaten over the head 2-3 times by Police, at which point she lost consciousness. The Police, fearing that her injuries were serious, called for Emergency Medical Assistance. Hope and Help confirmed that after returning to the shelter from the Police that day, the victim was visibly shaken and had a large bruise from an injection administered by the responding doctor. Other assertions by the victims include being forced to sign victim/witness reports under threat and abusive language and name-calling.

11. (C) A source of frustration for the police may be a lack of cooperation and understanding of the situation on the part of some of the victims. Hope and Help has raised the awareness of the victims on the trafficking phenomenon and their rights under Armenian law. However, they are still having a hard time identifying themselves as victims and hold out hope that their "belongings" (i.e., clothing, electronics, furniture, etc. procured by the traffickers)

will be returned to them. One of the victims was romantically involved with one of the traffickers while still in Uzbekistan and "out of love for him" is torn about providing information to the Police.

WHAT WILL BE THE FATE OF THE VICTIMS?

¶12. (SBU) In the past, IOM Armenia assisted in the voluntary repatriation of Uzbek trafficking victims in transit through Armenia to Uzbekistan. IOM does not have a mission in Uzbekistan; therefore, IOM Kazakhstan provided assistance in this instance. The return was slow and cumbersome. Hope and Help is currently working with IOM to determine the possibility of providing return assistance to the current victims, if Armenian law enforcement does not deport the women and returns the confiscated passports. Post will continue to follow developments in this case.

ORDWAY